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ABSTRACT

The relationship between referral and special education outcome was investigated in the State of Florida, where students are referred by category (i.e., referred for learning disability services, mental retardation services, etc.). Of specific interest was the congruence between categories for which students were referred and eventual placements. Results indicated that 72% of the 201 students (grades K-10) referred were placed in some form of special education, and that most were placed in the special education category for which they were referred. Variations in the congruence between referral and outcome as a function of the person submitting the referrals were relatively minor, except for parents, for whom 79% of the referred students were not placed in special education. The results are seen to be another indication of the primary importance of the referral decision and the extent to which placement teams operate confirmation conferences. (Author/CL)

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Research Report No. 136

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THE CONGRUENCE BETWEEN REASON FOR REFERRAL AND PLACEMENT OUTCOME

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Research Report No. 136

THE CONGRUENCE BETWEEN REASON FOR REFERRAL AND PLACEMENT OUTCOME

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Abstract

The relationship between referral and special education outcome was investigated in a state where students are referred by category (i.e., referred for LD services, MR services, etc.). Of specific interest was the congruence between categories for which students were referred and eventual placements. Results indicated that 72% of the students referred were placed in some form of special education, and that most were placed in the special education category for which they were referred. Variations in the congruence between referral and outcome as a function of the person submitting the referrals were relatively minor, except for parents, for whom 79% of the referred students were not placed in special education. The results are another indication of the primary importance of the referral decision and the extent to which placement teams operate confirmation conferences.

The Congruence Between Reason for Referral and Placement Outcome

In most school districts teams of professionals assess and make placement decisions about students referred for psychoeducational evaluation. It is the referral decision that triggers action on the part of the placement team members. In a recent study (Algozzine, Ysseldyke, & Christenson, in press), it was reported that three to five percent of the school age population was referred for special education. An average of 92% of the referred students were tested; 73% of those tested were placed in special education programs (Algozzine, Christenson, & Ysseldyke, 1982). These data alone suggest that there is a high probability of referred children being placed in special education programs.

Placement may be a foregone conclusion as referral triggers what Algozzine et al. called a "search for pathology." When children are referred, personnel begin the process by looking for what is wrong with the child. Placing children in special education is seen as a way of helping teachers. The referral itself seems to introduce bias into the decision-making process (cf. Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1980; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Regan, & McGue, 1981). Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, and Graden (1982) reported that there was little relationship between decisions reached by placement teams and the extent to which the assessment data supported those decisions. In light of such findings, it becomes important to examine more closely the effect of the referral itself on outcomes for students. If the referral is a presupposition to the outcome, then the entire referral-to-placement process becomes suspect.

In most school districts students are referred simply for evaluation. Yet, in other school districts, students are referred for specific types of services or for specific special education services. Investigation of the placement outcomes of these referrals provides a unique opportunity for studying the importance of the referral of a student for special education. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between referral and placement outcome under these conditions. Specifically, we examined the extent to which the category for which a student was referred agreed with the category in which the student was placed (if the student was placed). In addition, we looked at the degree of agreement between referral category and placement as a function of the person making the referral.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 258 students from 31 schools in Florida. These students were ones whose school records had been made available for the study. First or original referrals accounted for 201 of the cases; included were 133 boys and 68 girls. The remaining 57 referrals (43 boys, 14 girls) were reevaluation cases. The referrals represented all grade levels from grades K-10. Of the 201 first referrals, 48.8% were in grades K-3, 39.8% were in grades 4-7, and 11.4% were in grades 8-10. Of the reevaluations, 19.3% were in grades K-3, 52.6% were in grades 4-7, and 15.8% were in grades 8-10.

Procedure

The data were collected by reviewing school records of a sample of children referred in a Florida school district. This particular

site was chosen for this study since state regulations require that the person making the referral specify the category of special education for which he or she believes the student is eligible. Because of this requirement, it was possible to study directly the relationship between the stated referral reason and placement outcome. The records used in the study were randomly selected.

The following information was collected by reviewing the records: (1) the category of special education placement for which the student was being referred, (2) whether the case was an original referral or reevaluation, (3) who was making the referral, and (4) the decision outcome. Referring agents were teachers, school or staffing teams, counselors, principals, and parents. In a number of cases, the referring agent was not specified. Special education categories included the following: learning disabled (LD), emotionally disturbed or socially maladjusted (ED), educable mentally retarded (EMR), trainable mentally retarded (TMR), hearing impaired (HI), physically handicapped (PH), multiply handicapped (MH), and gifted.

Data Analysis

The results were summarized by cross tabulating reason for referral with placement outcome for first referrals and reevaluations separately. Both chi square analyses and Kappa correlations were calculated. Results were analyzed further by investigating the effect the person making the referral had on the outcome.

Results

First Referrals

Overall, 144 of 201 students (71.6%) referred for the first time were placed in special education. Ten students had been referred for "reasons" other than a specific category (e.g., appropriate testing, test for information only, achievement low); 30% (n=3) of these were placed in special education and 70% (n=7) were not placed. Twenty students had no reason or category listed (i.e., the space was left blank); 75% of these students were placed in special education. Of the 171 students referred for a specific category, 126 (73.7%) were placed in special education.

Table 1 is a summary of the percentage of students placed in each category after being referred for that category. As is evident in the table, most students were placed in the special education category for which they had been referred. The Kappa correlation between referral category and placement category was .88, indicating considerable agreement between the two. Of the five special education programs for which students were referred, each had over 60% of the students placed in those same programs. In comparison, the percentages of the referred students placed in other categories or not placed at all were quite low. In general, if a student was not placed in the category for which he/she had been referred, the student was most likely not placed in special education. A chi square comparison of the numbers of students placed and not placed in special education as a function of the referral category was nonsignificant, $\chi^2(4) = 2.06$, as was a chi square comparison of the numbers of students who were placed in

the category for which they were referred and who were placed in other categories, $\chi^2(4) = 2.10$.

Insert Table 1 about here

Of the 201 first referrals reviewed in this study, 103 students were referred for learning disability placements. This is slightly over half of the total referrals. Of the 20 students not referred for a specific category or reason, 15 (75%) were placed in learning disability programs.

As the objectivity of the handicapping condition increased, so did the percentage of referred students placed in those categories. The rate of placement of students referred for hearing impaired programs was 100%. Those categories with less objective placement criteria, such as LD and ED, had lower percentages of students placed, although still greater than 60%.

Of the 201 original referrals, the referral source was known in 61 cases. However, only 51 of these were referrals for specific special education categories. Parents were particularly likely to refer students without listing a specific category; 4 (44.4%) of the parent referrals had unspecified categories. The outcomes of the nonspecific referrals were 75% (n=3) no special placement and 25% (n=1) LD placement. Table 2 is a summary of the percentages of students referred for each category who were placed in the same category, a different category, or not placed, as a function of the person making the referral. In this sample, most referrals had been

made by teachers. Over 50% of the students referred by teachers were placed in the category for which they had been referred. Although the numbers of students referred by counselors, principals, and school staffing teams were small, the congruence between referral and placement was very high. This was especially true for principals; 100.0% of the students they referred for specific categories were placed in the category for which they had been referred. In fact, all of the students they referred (even the ones referred without any category listed) were placed in some special education category. In contrast, parents who referred their children for special education placement had the outcome of no placement (remaining in the standard program) 80% of the time if they listed a specific referral reason and 75% of the time if they did not.

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 3 is a display of the percentage of students placed in the category for which they were referred as a function of the person making the referral. In general, percentages of students placed in the categories for which they were referred were high except for one or two specific categories.

Insert Table 3 about here

Teachers referred 24 students for specific special education categories; 15 of these students were placed within special education.

The Kappa correlation between referral category and placement category was .91, indicating considerable agreement for those students actually placed in special education (62% of teacher referrals). The greatest discrepancy occurred for students whom teachers had referred for LD services; only one of the nine students referred for this category actually was placed in the category. For all other categories, the placement rate was at least 75%.

A Kappa correlation of .82 was found for counselor referrals. As for teachers, the correspondence between referral category and placement outcome was at least 75%, except for LD referrals where none of the three students referred for that category were placed in the category. However, in contrast to teacher referrals, all 11 of the students referred for a specific category were placed in some special education category.

Of the six referrals principals made for specific categories, all six students were placed in special education. In fact, all students were placed in the category for which they were referred (Kappa = 1.00).

School staffing teams referred five students for specific categories; four of these students were placed in special education (Kappa = .64). Of the three students referred for the LD category, only one was placed in that category; another of these students was placed in the EMR category and another was not placed in special education.

Parents referred five students for specific categories; four of these students were not placed in special education services. For the

one student who was placed, the placement category was the same as the referral category (Kappa = 1.00).

Reevaluation Referrals

For 57 students in the sample, the referral was for a reevaluation of placement. Overall, 11 of the 56 students for whom a specific category was listed (19.6%) were moved to a regular education placement; 80.4% remained in some category of special education.

Table 4 is a summary of the percentages of students who remained in the same category, moved to a different category, or moved to regular education as a function of reevaluation referral category. As is evident in the table, most students remained in the special education category in which they were being served at the time of reevaluation. In only two categories (LD and EMR) did movement to another category or movement to regular education occur. Over 30% of the students in the LD category were moved to regular education following reevaluation.

Insert Table 4 about here

Table 5 is a display of the percentages of students remaining in the same category despite the reevaluation, as a function of the person making the reevaluation referral. The referral source was known for 26 of the reevaluation referrals. In general, the percentages of these students remaining in the same categories were high except in a few specific cases.

Insert Table 5 about here

Teachers made 15 of the reevaluation referrals in this sample of 26 students; 10 of these students remained in special education. All three LD students were moved to regular education following reevaluation; two of the three EMR students were moved to regular education. For those students remaining in special education, the Kappa correlation between referral category and outcome was 1.00.

A Kappa correlation of .75 was found for counselor reevaluation referrals when only those students who remained in special education were considered. The LD category was the only category in which all students did not remain in the same category; two of the students were moved to regular education and one was moved to an ED placement.

All school staffing team reevaluation referral students remained in the same categories (Kappa = 1.00).

Discussion

In this study, most of the students referred for a specific special education category were placed in that category. There are two possible explanations for this phenomenon. It is possible that those who make referrals have a good eye for appropriately identifying specific handicapping conditions. Another explanation that appears more plausible, however, is that the referral itself influences or biases the outcome. Of the 201 original referrals, 72% of the students were placed in some form of special education. This placement rate is nearly identical to that reported by Algozzine et

al. (1982); they found that an average of 73% of evaluated students were placed in special education programs. This is a high rate, and one wonders whether some of these students could not have been provided programming within the regular classroom.

The data from reevaluations were not any more gratifying. Only 23% of the 57 students were reclassified or declassified. Particularly in the case of LD students where a frequently stated goal is remediation of the learning problem, it is disheartening to see that only about 30% were returned to regular education. Algozzine, Ysseldyke, and Christenson (in press) discussed the concern of "burgeoning masses" in special education, and advocated that we must begin to address this problem or suffer the consequences of increasing special education services with no money to fund these services.

When analyzing the data according to the person making the referral, it was interesting to note that school personnel making referrals were more likely than parents to have the outcome result in special education placement. Caution is suggested in interpreting these results since the number of referrals per referral source often was small; replication is needed before generalizations can be made. There are two plausible explanations for these preliminary findings. One is that school personnel have more training and expertise in identifying handicapped students and, therefore, are better prepared to make accurate referrals. Another explanation is that school personnel have more power in the decision-making process than parents and therefore, have more control over the outcomes. Parent referrals perhaps are viewed as not as valid as those made by school personnel.

This is particularly a problem if the referral process is not focused on intervention. If the only solution to academic difficulties seen by the school is special education placement, there probably will be a number of frustrated people when special education is denied and no further help is given. Parents who refer their child due to concerns about the child's school performance may feel that the school does not care when no help is given.

If one accepts the conclusion that, at least in some of these cases, the referral biased the outcome for the student, then one begins to wonder about the validity of the entire referral and placement process. In order to avoid this kind of bias, it would be helpful to not only not refer for a specific category of special education, but to not refer for special education at all. Rather, when a person has a concern about a student's performance, that person should be assisted in defining these concerns in the form of referral questions. What is it that must be known about the student in order to develop an appropriate intervention for that student? Rather than making a referral that states, "I think this student could benefit from some learning disabilities resource help," it is more productive to state the referral in question form. For example, "What are the student's silent reading comprehension skills? What are the student's strengths and weaknesses in reading comprehension? Given the student's skills, would another reading series be more appropriate?" These kinds of questions should assist the multidisciplinary team in choosing appropriate assessment tools that will provide answers to the questions. The answers, in turn, should provide valuable information for developing an intervention for the child.

In summary, the results of this investigation suggest that the referral may be a source of bias in the assessment and placement process. It was demonstrated that not only was there a high degree of relationship between the referral and outcome, but that school personnel who referred seemed to have more influence than parents.

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Table 1

Placement Outcomes for First Referrals[a]

Referral Category[b]	N	Placed in that Category	Placed in Other Categories	Not Placed
LD	103	67.0	5.8	27.2
ED	13	61.5	7.7	30.8
EMR	18	72.2	11.1	16.7
HI	3	100.0	0.0	0.0
Gifted	34	70.6	0.0	29.4

[a]Entries are percentages of students referred within each category.

[b]Two other types of referrals (other and none) are excluded in this table. The two categories accounted for 30 of the 201 referrals (14.9%).

Table 2

Placement Outcomes for First Referrals as a Function of the Referral Source[a]

Source	N	Placed in that Category	Placed in Other Categories	Not Placed
Teacher	24	58.3	4.2	37.5
Counselor	11	63.6	0.9	27.3
Principal	6	100.0	0.0	0.0
Parent	5	20.0	0.0	80.0
Staffing team	5	60.0	20.0	20.0

[a]Entries are percentages of students referred by each source for a specific category. Nonspecific referrals were made by 5 teachers, 4 parents, and 1 principal.

Table 3

Percentages of Students Placed in Category for Which Referred as a Function of the Referrer[a]

	Category										
	LD		ED		EMR		HI		Gifted		
Referrer	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	Kappa[b]
Teacher	9	11.1	2	100.0	4	100.0	1	100.0	8	75.0	.91
Counselor	3	0.0	0	--	4	75.0	1	100.0	3	100.0	.82
Principal	0	--	2	100.0	3	100.0	0	--	1	100.0	1.00
Staffing team	3	33.3	1	100.0	1	100.0	0	--	0	--	.64
Parent	2	0.0	1	0.0	0	--	0	--	2	50.0	1.00

[a]For each category, N reflects the number referred for that category and % reflects the percentage actually placed in that category.

[b]The Kappa correlation reflects the degree of agreement between referral category and placement category for those students actually placed in special education.

Table 4

Placement Outcomes for Reevaluations[a]

Reevaluation Category	N	Remained in Category	Moved to Other Category	Moved to Regular Education
LD	28	64.3	3.6	32.1
ED	3	100.0	0.0	0.0
EMR	13	84.6	0.0	15.4
TMR	2	100.0	0.0	0.0
HI	4	100.0	0.0	0.0
PH	2	100.0	0.0	0.0
Gifted	4	100.0	0.0	0.0

[a]Entries are percentages of students referred for reevaluation within each category.

Table 5

Percentages of Students Remaining in Category as a Function of Reevaluation Referrer

	Categories																	
	LD		ED		EMR		TMR		HI		PH		Gifted					
Referrer	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	Kappa[b]			
Teacher	3	0.0	1	100.0	3	33.3	1	100.0	3	100.0	2	100.0	2	100.0	1.00			
Counselor	4	25.0	2	100.0	2	100.0	0	--	0	--	0	--	0	--	.75			
Staffing Team	1	100.0	0	--	1	100.0	0	--	0	--	0	--	1	100.0	1.00			

[a]For each staffing, N reflects the number of students referred for reevaluation in that category and % reflects the percentage actually remaining in that category.

[b]The Kappa correlation reflects the degree of agreement between reevaluation referral category and placement category for those students remaining in a special education placement.

PUBLICATIONS

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